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THE MEANING WHICH THE WORD

MYSTERY,

BEARS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT;

CONSIDERED AND APPLIED,

IN

A SERMON,

PREACHED TO AN ASSEMBLY OF MINISTERS,

On the Thursday Morning's Lecture, at Exeter, May 4, 1791.

BY

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THE NEW TESTAMENT

MYSTERY

OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

CONSIDERED AND EXPLAINED

A SERMON

PREACHED TO AN ASSEMBLY OF MINISTERS

ON THE THIRTEEN MONTH OF JANUARY 1860

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1 COR. II. 7.

BUT WE SPEAK THE WISDOM OF GOD IN A MYSTERY, EVEN THE HIDDEN WISDOM, WHICH GOD ORDAINED BEFORE THE WORLD UNTO OUR GLORY.

AFTER the apostle Paul had enjoyed, under the divine providence, the honour and happiness of planting a numerous Christian church, chiefly of Gentile converts, in the city of Corinth: the influence of his authority was opposed, and the good effects of his labours, in a great degree, counteracted by some criminal irregularities in their conduct and the insinuating address of some teachers amongst them. Some of the arts, which these men employed to secure respect with the Corinthians, were high pretensions to eloquence and philosophy.

The apostle shews, that these human attainments were not necessary in preaching the gospel: nay, that the gospel and its ministers had higher support and nobler recommendations. The truths and facts, which they published, had a sublimer origin than any discoveries which human wit or learning could make; and needed not the



embellishments of oratory and a laboured language to set them off: they were from God and the preaching of them was supported by his power. So the apostle argues, v. 4. before the text: "My speech and my preaching were not with
 "enticing words of mens' wisdom, but in demon-
 "stration of the spirit and of power:" and in the text the same argument is pursued. "But I
 "speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, *even*
 "the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before
 "the world unto our glory."

The words, you perceive, assert that the Christian doctrine is from God and from him only; having been formed in his mind before the world, and for ages concealed, or hid in his counsels.

It is, therefore, called hidden wisdom, and styled also the wisdom of God in a mystery.

The word, *mystery*, as it is used on religious subjects, is not generally understood, and is frequently misapplied. It is often employed to silence enquiry, to stifle doubts and to cover over absurdities and contradictions with a kind of sacred veil. I will, therefore, take occasion, from the text, to examine in what sense the word occurs in the New Testament, and to lay before you it's true meaning. Some useful information

will, I conceive arise from the enquiry, and some important instructions may be grafted upon it.

You will accompany me with your attention, while I bring together the places where the *word, mystery*, is to be met with in the New Testament, to shew it's sense and meaning as a scriptural term. It is, properly speaking, a Greek word; derived, perhaps, originally from the Hebrew: but into whichever language it is traced, it comes from words that certainly and easily lead to it's true signification; viz. from words, which mean to *hide, secrete, or conceal*. Hence *mystery* is only another word for any thing hidden or concealed, or a *secret*. It is observable, that whatever awful import it may appear to carry when applied to religious subjects, it is a word common and familiar in the affairs of civil life, when we speak of the mysteries of a business or trade, an art or profession. In this use of it the meaning is obvious: it imports not what is incapable of being understood, but what, though at present unknown, by the help of a teacher may be learnt. In ancient times, when, for instance, the apostle wrote, the term was very much applied to those parts of the religious worship of the heathens, which were not publicly performed in the presence of all the people, but reserved to be practised, in secret, by chosen persons. It means therefore their secret or concealed religious rites.

When the places, where the word occurs in the New Testament, are examined, it will plainly appear, that it refers only to the secrecy, in which the subject, spoken of, had been involved. I will point out to you the particular truths and facts, which are called mysteries, and you will then judge, whether they be not so called, merely, because they were not known to former ages: but were then recently revealed.

For instance, Rom. xiv. 29. The state of blindness under which the Jews are to remain, till the rest of the world be converted to the gospel, is called a mystery. "I would not, brethren, that you should be ignorant of *this mystery*, that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come."

Here you see a particular fact, that is, the perpetuity of the unhappy situation into which the Jews had fallen, is called a mystery; because it had not been known, till the apostle announced it.

In 1 Cor. xv. 51. the term is applied to the information there given concerning what will take place with respect to those who shall be found alive at the coming of Christ. "Behold, I shew you a *mystery*, we shall not all sleep, or die, but we shall all be changed."

But the fact, with reference to which the word is most commonly and emphatically used, is the *calling of the Gentiles* into the Christian church, without any subjection to the law of Moses. Fully to this purpose is Eph. i. 9, 10. "Having made known unto us," i. e. the apostles, particularly Paul, "the mystery of his will," i. e. his "secret will," according to his good pleasure, "which he hath purposed in himself:" what that was follows in the next verse, viz. "that in the dispensation of the fulness of time he might gather in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth, even in him." Compare this with Ephes. iii. 3, 5, 6. "where the apostle declares, that by revelation God had made known to him the *mystery*," i. e. the secret; "which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit;" namely, "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel." For publishing this truth, or fact, the apostle suffered much, and calls himself therefore "the prisoner of Jesus Christ" for the Gentiles, "v. 1. vi. 19. he requests the prayers of the Ephesians, that utterance might be given to him that he might open his mouth boldly to make known

“ the *mystery* of the gospel.” According to the same style, the affording to the Gentiles the hope of glory is called a *mystery*; a matter which had been hid from ages, but was now made manifest, Col. i. 25, 26, 27. “ I am made a minister according to the dispensation of God, which is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God; even the *mystery*, which has been hidden from ages and generations; but now is made manifest to the saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this *mystery* among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you,” or among you, “ the hope of glory.”

In the first epistle to Timothy, iii. 16. the apostle speaking of the great *mystery* of godliness, immediately subjoins a series of plain, intelligible facts, viz. “ God manifested in the flesh, i.e. by the man Christ Jesus, being “ justified by the spirit; seen of angels; preached unto the Gentiles; believed on in the world; and received up into glory.” These were all facts, that fell under the notice and observation of mankind; and, though of great importance, easy to be understood: but as they had not taken place through the former ages of the world, and were lately revealed, they came under the description of the *mystery* of godliness.

By these examples it is obvious, that every particular of the Christian doctrine, which was not known before, is called a *mystery*. And, because the gospel Revelation unfolded, brought to light and made known the hidden purposes of divine mercy, it is called by the same name: as, in the text, where the apostle speaks of the gospel in general, as “the wisdom of God in a mystery:” which you will observe, he explains in the next clause by the phrase, “the hidden wisdom of God.” In another place it is called “the mystery of faith.” In like manner, because the apostles were instructed and commissioned to make known and publish the designs of God’s mercy for the salvation of mankind, particularly in calling the Gentiles to partake of his grace without subjection to the law of Moses, they are called the “stewards of the mysteries of God.” On the same, or like, grounds, our Lord himself saith; “that to them is given to “make known the mysteries of the kingdom of “heaven.” Matt. xiii. 11. This is said not with respect to any inexplicable principles, but only with reference to those plain and useful truths, which he had conveyed under the parable of the sower; of which his hearers did not see the design; but the whole was most easy to be understood, when Christ had opened his meaning. It was very capable of being explained, though at first it was concealed under figurative terms.

There are two or three passages in the New Testament, in which the word *mystery* is applied only to the particular import of some very figurative representations. Thus, in the epistle to the Ephesians, the apostle having compared the union between Christ and his church to the nearest and most endearing of all human connexions, calls his manner of speaking a "mystery." So, in the Book of Revelations "the mystery of the seven stars," and "the mystery of the woman," or of "Babylon the great," evidently means nothing but the plain and simple truths conveyed under those figurative representations*; and which, agreeably to the original and uniform meaning of the term are called "mysteries;" because, till the subject was explained, they were hidden under the disguise thrown over them by these representations. Thus also the doctrines, on which the kingdom of antichrist was afterwards founded, not having been clearly and fully promulgated, were said to be "the mystery of iniquity."

On the whole may we not suppose, that what has been offered, hath given you a just, plain and satisfactory account of the scriptural meaning of the word, *mystery*? Is it not evident from a sur-

* The Library, vol. i. p. 86.

vey of these passages, that it signifies, not an incomprehensible doctrine, but a truth which had been hidden and concealed from mankind, but was at length discovered and made known? It denotes nothing more than a secret; or a point of which men had, for some time received no information. "And in the same manner as the word, *secret*, is still made use of, after it is divulged; (as, when we say, the secret is well-known;) so the word, *mystery*, is used to signify the doctrines of the gospel, even after they had been publicly taught and explained".*

Having thus traced out the sense which the word *mystery* bears in the scriptures of the New Testament, for it doth not occur in the Old, I would proceed to lay before you some important instructions to be derived from this enquiry. And I observe,

1st. That the New Testament giveth no countenance to the common notions concerning mysteries in religion; meaning thereby inexplicable and incomprehensible doctrines. These are, undoubtedly, with respect to the ways as well as the nature of God, points, at which enquiry must stop; which not only puzzle but baffle the ca-

* Ben Mordecai's Letters, 8vo. vol. 2. p. 895.

pacities of the human mind. The mysteries of the gospel are not of this kind. They are truths or facts, which for ages were totally unknown and were afterwards revealed, and, when published, were easy to be understood. The word, *mystery*, in the scripture sense does not refer to the difficulties in which a question may be involved, but to a total ignorance of a principle, till it is declared. It relates not to the *comprehension* but to the *discovery* of a doctrine.

In after ages the word obtained another meaning. It was first of all and in an early period of the Christian church, applied to the Lord's supper: because that institution was observed in private by Christians, and concealed from the unbelievers, who were not permitted to be present at it. In the fourth century, with a view to silence the objections, which it was found not easy to answer, the doctrine of the Trinity was called a mystery, as inexplicable by reason and to be received by faith only: and whatever is incomprehensible in Nature was then first adduced as an argument for acquiescing in unintelligible principles of theology*. Since that time great use has been made of this argument, and the word, *mystery*, always, I conceive, conveys, to the

* Priestley's History of the Christian Church, v. 2. p. 330.

minds of the generality, the idea of a doctrine that is above our understanding.

If no harm arose from affixing a mistaken meaning to the word, the error would not require or merit much notice. But the evil is, that men are by the use of this term, deterred from examining religious principles under this notion, that to attempt an explanation of them would be useless or profane. Not Papists only, but even Protestants have their understandings enslaved by it. It became an engine by which to work on, and gain over, the credulity of the multitude; and is made a sanction to absurdity and nonsense and a cloak for ignorance. Christianity itself, under the idea of it's containing and inculcating such mysteries as are contrary to sense and reason, becomes the subject of derision and contempt. When after all this sense of the word, as signifying a proposition which is inexplicable, is very remote from the original meaning of it, was introduced in the corrupt ages of Christianity, has been employed to protect from examination it's grossest corruptions, and, so far from being a true one, will not agree with any one text of the New Testament.

2dly. I would observe, from this subject, the great importance of having recourse to the scrip-

tures, and of comparing them together on subjects of religious enquiry. The indolence and credulity of mankind too easily dispose them to acquiesce in the truth of many opinions, merely because they have been generally received and confidently asserted. It is taken for granted, things are, as they are often represented to be. Because men are frequently told, that such and such principles are mysteries and therefore above their comprehension, and to be received with implicit submission, it is supposed, that this meaning of the word is borrowed from the New Testament. But, when we examine the places, where it occurs, you see it bears no such meaning in them: but only denotes something, that had been a secret or concealed.

The discovery of the true signification of so common a word, and which though apparently drawn from scripture, is almost always used in an unscriptural sense, may surprise the mind. It is certainly an instructive warning, how we suffer ourselves to be misled by common apprehensions: it is an admonition to search and examine.

It is examination, that delivers from prejudice, imparts real knowledge and produces rational conviction. It is examination, which

corrects error, leads to truth and pours light upon the mind. Because a term is familiar to the ears, therefore it is supposed, that it is understood. Because the scriptures are often quoted and whole chapters often read, it is concluded, that we are well acquainted with their contents. But would men be at pains, to set down and trace that word, of the meaning of which they are so confident, to it's original use and through the different places of scripture, in which it is to be met with; would they collect together the texts, that relate to one point, examine the connexion in which they stand and compare one passage with another, as we have now attempted to do, their mistakes would be rectified and they would gain a degree of knowledge and information, of which they have no conception.

This is the case with the point before us. By bringing together the places, in which the word, *mystery*, is found, it appears that the common ideas annexed to it have no support in the New Testament:—That the mysteries, mentioned there, are plain facts:—and called so, because they arose from the hidden designs and purposes of God's mercy so formed before the world was; which, when accomplished and made known, cease to be mysteries. This leads me to observe,

3dly. That Christianity is a *revealed mystery*: it is the discovery of what was before unknown and concealed. The mysteries, specified in the New Testament, are counsels of heaven, unfolding themselves in the events of time. They are *facts*, which did, or will, fall under the notice of the senses. They were first shewn to the apostles, and then by them revealed to the Christian world. Thus the apostle speaks, in one place of "the *revelation* of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but is now made manifest." In another place, he speaks of having "received by *revelation* the mystery, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, but was now *preached* among the Gentiles, that all men might *see* what is the fellowship of the mystery." The "great mystery of godliness" is represented as "*preached* unto the Gentiles and believed on in the world." The apostle avows, that he *shews* or *discovers* the mystery of the change which they who shall be alive at the coming of Christ, shall undergo: and he prays, "that a door of utterance might be given unto him," a proper resolution and fortitude "of mind," that he might open his mouth boldly "to *make known* the mystery of the gospel."

What is the conclusion to be drawn from these

passages, but that whatever mysteries, there are in the religion of Christ, they are now *made known* and *revealed*. The mystery, in reality, *hath ceased*: it doth not, properly speaking, belong to the gospel; but to the ages before the gospel. The designs of grace, which were then hidden and concealed secrets, are now explained and unfolded by the event and are no longer secrets or mysteries. Christianity is *the discovery of the secret*; or, *the revelation of the mystery*.

It is our privilege, our honour and our joy, that to us "the hidden wisdom of God" hath been preached; that to us, by the labours of the apostles, it is given to *know* the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. All the truths, which concern the salvation of mankind and the kingdom of the Messiah are clearly and fully explained and laid open before us. Can it then be right in *us* to veil religion under a mystical garb, or to make that obscure and difficult which God has made plain and easy? God, in his goodness, sent his apostles and hath spoken to us by Jesus Christ to give us the knowledge of his designs; and, as it were, to strip off the mystery from our faith: and shall we choose to have it involved in darkness? when it is the design of the gospel, that we should understand the scheme of our redemption, shall we affect to have it unintelligible?

“ Such a conduct is very unaccountable, because there can, one would think, be no motive to it. Mysteries yield neither pleasure, nor profit. For, as with respect to the works of Nature, all our pleasure arises from the perception of beauty, harmony and usefulness; and, however, we may imagine innumerable secret beauties which we have not discovered, yet till they are known they afford no real satisfaction, nor can we reap any advantage from them: it is the same with respect to mysteries in religion, we can neither be delighted, nor profited by them, because we do not understand them; that is, in other words, “ they are really nothing at all to us.” Nay, we cannot so much as admire them, because admiration necessarily supposes, that we have a knowledge of the grandeur of the works and the excellence of the object. The utmost, therefore, that can be said, is that we are confounded and puzzled. And is there any pleasure in that, or any advantage merely in being in the dark and having no ideas?”*—But this brings me to remark,

4thly. That you may understand your religion, and ought to apply yourselves to the study of it. The gospel, you see, is designed to un-

* Dr. Forster's Sermons, v. 1, p. 177, 178.

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fold the mysteries of God, and to make known his hidden wisdom. There is not any one passage in the New Testament, which even intimates to us, that a mystery is an improper subject of examination, or above our comprehension. On the contrary, the apostle speaketh of understanding all mysteries, 1 Cor. xiii. 2. and of *knowing* the things that are freely given to us of God. He expresseth his ardent desire, for the Colossians, that they might have a full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mysteries of God; so that the mysteries he preached were to be acknowledged by the understanding: and he that speaks in an unknown tongue is said to speak mysteries merely for want of an interpreter.

If then Christianity be a revealed mystery; a mystery made manifest and explained, it becomes the subject of enquiry and serious study. If the gospel be meant to impart to you knowledge, and to give you information on matters that relate to your salvation, it is certainly capable of being understood, and ought to engage your attention to understand it. Ignorance hath been sometimes called the mother of devotion; but it is the devotion of weakness, and superstition. You, Christians, are called to light and knowledge, to search the scriptures and to prove all things. You live under a dispensation of which

it was predicted that men should not need to
 “ teach one another, saying ; know the Lord, for
 “ all should know him from the least to the great-
 “ est.”

“ I have a strong persuasion” (to adopt the
 remarks and words of an excellent writer) “ that
 “ the gospel was plain at first. It is contained in
 “ the four Gospels and Acts, which are plain
 “ books. If Christianity is not plain now, I ap-
 “ prehend it must be our own fault some way or
 “ other. A doctrine that contains plain directions
 “ of duty and plain promises of a reward, suffi-
 “ cient to encourage to duty in all circumstances,
 “ to strengthen against temptations, to give com-
 “ fort under afflictions, to calm the affections, and
 “ can be easily proved to be certain, is indeed an
 “ excellent doctrine. This is true religion. This
 “ is a pearl of great price, a treasure indeed, for
 “ which a man may rationally part with all that
 “ he hath to buy to it. I say easily proved to be
 “ certain : but it requires a sincere and honest dis-
 “ position. Such a mind with good instruction,
 “ will learn more in a few hours, than the preju-
 “ diced and selfish in an age. Indeed such as
 “ these can never receive the truth unless mixed
 “ with other matters that subvert it.”*

* Lardner's works, vol. i. his life p. 88, the note.

These considerations invite men to read the New Testament carefully; for it is truly encouraging to think, that the great things of God, though sublime, are plain: that religion is intelligible: and that it's principles and truths lie within the reach of their capacity. It is the great use of a gospel ministry to make known to you the mysteries of God, and to assist your knowledge of the scriptures. You have then every inducement to make religion the subject of your examination, and to improve your acquaintance with it.

Great profit and pleasure will arise from it. The mind will be enlightened. Faith will stand upon conviction and evidence. Error and prejudice will be dissipated. Your worship, being founded in knowledge, will be rational and edifying. The preaching of Christianity will afford you solid and pious entertainment; it will improve your understandings and your hearts. And, in proportion, as you understand more and better the hidden wisdom of God, you will grow in the love of God and the love of man.

Lastly. The subject instructs and admonishes us with what temper and dispositions to receive the preaching of "the hidden wisdom of God." You should "receive it as the word not of men but, of God." Though the matter of our dis-

course consists of intelligible truths and plain facts; though the gospel be a revealed mystery, it is nevertheless to be had in great reverence, and to be treated with serious respect. It is, though plain, sublime: and, though easy to be understood, momentous and solemn. Though we wish to bring religion down to a level with the most common understanding, it is far from our intention, or even from the tendency of the view we would give you of it, to diminish it's weight with your minds, or to lessen your sacred respect for it.

When the mysteries of the gospel remained hidden, they could have no influence over men: not being known, they could not purify the heart nor direct the conduct. But being discovered, being made known, being preached, they ought to have the greatest influence over us. For "great is the mystery of godliness." It is most true and certain: weighty and important: carrying with it the best and kindest design towards men, and leading to virtue, to heaven and to glory. This is the idea suggested by the apostle in the text: "I speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world to *our glory*." It stands opposed to the wisdom and glory of this

world, which is empty and transient.* This mystery, this hidden wisdom, with which you are addressed, if you consider it's origin, is divine; it is from God: if you reflect on it's end, it will terminate in immortality and eternal life; it points out the road to a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

What merits, what ought to awaken, attention, if not that wisdom; which came from heaven, unfolds the counsels of eternity, and conducts to everlasting honour and bliss? Hath it then our serious attention? Doth it meet with our candid, sincere and practical regards? In vain is the wisdom of God spoken to us; in vain are the counsels of heaven for our salvation revealed; in vain is there a discovery of the mystery hid from ages, if we do not humbly and thankfully embrace it, bestow upon it our chief thoughts, and improve it to correct the disordered state of our minds, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Happy are you, Christians, in the information which you have received concerning those gracious designs, which in former times were not made known to the sons of men! Happy are you

* Slichtingius in locum.

in the discovery of those things which God hath prepared for them that love him: which "eye had not seen, nor ear heard," and with the knowledge of which prophets and patriarchs were not favoured. And shall these discoveries be neglected? Or shall the heavenly truth through our abuse of it, or disobedience to it, turn to the condemnation of any one of us? A sense of duty, a sense of interest forbid it! God, in his mercy, prevent it! Amen.

THE END.

